

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on the Post-9/11 GI Bill in Fairfax, Virginia

August 3, 2009

The President. Hello. Thank you. Please, have a seat. Good morning, everybody.

Audience members. Good morning.

The President. It is wonderful to see all of you, and wonderful to have one of the best partners that anybody could have in elected office, our Vice President, Joe Biden—thrilled to have him here.

I want to thank Staff Sergeant Miller for the gracious introduction. I want to thank President Merten for his hospitality. There are a couple of people here who deserve all the credit, because they got a very tough bill done, and part of the reason they were able to get it done was just because of their extraordinary personal credibility. These are—one is new to the Senate, and one had been there a while, and yet together they formed an incredibly formidable team. They're both class acts. Please give a big round of applause to Virginia's own, John Warner and Jim Webb.

I know that we've got a number of Member of Congress who are here, and I want to thank them all for their outstanding work. I want to point out that Senator Mark Warner could not be here, but we appreciate him. We've got the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, a hero in his own right, General Eric Shinseki, and I want everybody to please acknowledge him. And of the original bill sponsors who could not be here today, we've got Senator Chuck Hagel, Senator Frank Lautenberg, Representative Harry Mitchell, Representative Bobby Scott, Representative Ginny Brown-Waite, and Representative Peter King. All of them worked hard along with the delegation that is present, and so we are very grateful to all of them.

I want to join all of today's speakers in thanking those of you who worked so hard to make this occasion possible. But above all, I want to pay tribute to the veterans who are now advancing their dreams by pursuing an education.

Obviously, I'm honored to be here and to renew our commitment to ensure that the men and women who wear the uniform of the United States of America get the opportunities that they have earned. I was a proud cosponsor of the post-9/11 GI bill as Senator. I'm committed to working with Secretary Shinseki to see that it is successfully implemented as President. And we do this not just to meet our moral obligation to those who've sacrificed greatly on our behalf and on behalf of the country, we do it because these men and women must now be prepared to lead our Nation in the peaceful pursuit of economic leadership in the 21st century.

This generation of service men and women has already earned a place of honor in American history. Each of them signed up to serve, many after they knew that they would be sent into harm's way. Over the last 8 years, they have endured tour after tour of duty in dangerous and distant places. They've experienced grueling combat, from the streets of Fallujah to the harsh terrain of Helmand Province. They've adapted to complex insurgencies, protected local populations, and trained foreign security forces. So by any measure, they are the authors of one of the most extraordinary chapters of military service in the history of our Nation. And I don't make that statement lightly. For we know that anyone who puts on the uniform joins an unbroken line of selfless patriots that stretches back to Lexington and

Concord. The freedom and prosperity that we enjoy would not exist without the service of generations of Americans who were willing to bear the heaviest and most dangerous burden.

But we also know this: The contributions that our service men and women can make to this Nation do not end when they take off that uniform. We owe a debt to all who serve. And when we repay that debt to those bravest Americans among us, then we are investing in our future, not just their future, but also the future of our own country.

Now, this was the lesson that America was sometimes too slow to learn. After the Civil War and World War I, we saw far too many veterans who were denied the chance to live their dreams, men who were unable to find in peace the hope that they had fought for in war.

And FDR knew this. In 1943, before the beaches of Normandy were stormed and the treacherous terrain of Iwo Jima was taken, he told the Nation that the veterans of World War II would be treated differently. He said that they must not be demobilized, and I quote, "to a place on a breadline," demobilized, "to a place on a breadline or on a corner selling apples." Instead, Roosevelt said, "The American people will insist on fulfilling this American obligation to the men and women in the Armed Forces who are winning this war for us."

That is precisely what the American people did. The GI bill was approved just weeks after D-Day, and carried with it a simple promise to all who had served: You pick the school; we'll help pick up the bill. And what followed was not simply an opportunity for our veterans; it was a transformation for our country. By 1947, half of all Americans enrolled in college were veterans. Now, ultimately, this would lead to 3 Presidents, 3 Supreme Court Justices, 14 Nobel Prize winners, and two dozen Pulitzer Prize winners. But more importantly, it produced hundreds of thousands of scientists and engineers, doctors and nurses—the backbone of the largest middle class in history. All told, nearly 8 million Americans were educated under the original GI bill, including my grandfather.

No number can sum up this sea change in our society. Reginald Wilson, a fighter pilot from Detroit, said, "I didn't know anyone who went to college. I never would have gone to college had it not been for the GI bill." H.G. Jones, a Navy man from North Carolina, said, "What happened in my rural Caswell County community happened all over the country... going to college was no longer a novelty." Indeed, one of the men who went to college on the GI bill, as I mentioned, was my grandfather, and I would not be standing here today if that opportunity had not led him West in search of opportunity.

So we owe the same obligations to this generation of service men and women, as was afforded that previous generation. That is the promise of the post-1911 [9/11]^{*} GI bill. It's driven by the same simple logic that drove the first GI bill: You pick the school; we'll help pick up the bill. And looking out at the audience today, I'm proud to see so many veterans who will be able to pursue their education with this new support from the American people.

And this is even more important than it was in 1944. The first GI bill helped build a post-war economy that has been transformed by revolutions in communications and technology. And that's why the post-1911—9/11 GI bill must give today's veterans the skills and training they need to fill the jobs of tomorrow. Education is the currency that can purchase success in the 21st century, and this is the opportunity that our troops have earned.

I'm also proud that all who have borne the burden of service these last several years will have access to this opportunity. We are including reservists and National Guard members,

^{*} White House correction

because they have carried out unprecedented deployments in Afghanistan and Iraq. We are including the military families who have sacrificed so much, by allowing the transfer of unused benefits to family members. And we are including those who pay the ultimate price, by making this benefit available to the children of those who lost their life in service of their country.

This is not simply a debt that we are repaying to the remarkable men and women who have served; it is an investment in our own country. The first GI bill paid for itself many times over through the increased revenue that came from a generation of men and women who received the skills and education that they needed to create their own wealth. The veterans who are here today—like the young post-9/11 veterans around the country—can lead the way to a lasting economic recovery and become the glue that holds our communities together. They too can become the backbone of a growing American middle class.

And even as we help our veterans learn the skills they need to succeed, I know that all of us can learn something from the men and women who serve our country. We have lived through an age when many people and institutions acted irresponsibly, when service often took a backseat to short-term profits, when hard choices were put aside for somebody else, for some other time. It's a time when easy distractions became the norm and the trivial has been taken too seriously.

The men and women who have served since 9/11 tell us a different story. While so many were reaching for the quick buck, they were heading out on patrol. While our discourse often produced more heat than light, especially here in Washington, they have put their very lives on the line for America. They have borne the responsibility of war. And now, with this policy, we are making it clear that the United States of America must reward responsibility and not irresponsibility. Now, with this policy, we are letting those who have borne the heaviest burden lead us into the 21st century.

And so today we honor the service of an extraordinary generation and look to America that they will help build tomorrow. With the post-9/11 GI bill, we can give our veterans the chance to live their dreams, and we can help unleash their talents and tap their creativity and be guided by their sense of responsibility to their fellow citizens and to this country that we all love so much.

And may God bless our troops and our veterans, and may God bless the United States of America. Thank you very much, everybody. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:20 a.m. at George Mason University. In his remarks, he referred to SSgt. James L. Miller, USMC, who introduced the President; Alan G. Merten, president, George Mason University; and former Senator John W. Warner and Senator Mark R. Warner of Virginia.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Post-9/11 GI bill, remarks on in Fairfax, VA.

Locations: Fairfax, VA.

Names: Biden, Joseph R., Jr.; Brown-Waite, Virginia "Ginny"; Hagel, Charles T. "Chuck"; King, Peter T.; Lautenberg, Frank R.; Merten, Alan G.; Miller, James L.; Mitchell, Harry E.; Scott, Robert C.; Shinseki, Eric K.; Warner, John W.; Warner, Mark R.; Webb, James H., Jr.

Subjects: Armed Forces, U.S. : GI bill legislation; Armed Forces, U.S. : Military family benefits, expansion of, legislation; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Deployment; Armed Forces, U.S. : Service members :: Service and dedication; Economy, national :

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